

FORMER ARMY AGENT TELLS CONGRESS OF POW CAMP
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A former Army special forces agent told Congress he saw possibly 45 American prisoners of war in Laos on a 1981 mission intended to disprove reports of U.S. servicemen held captive in Southeast Asia.

Photographs were taken of the men and their voices recorded by sensitive sound equipment, but the information was covered up by the U.S. government, Scott T. Barnes told the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Tuesday.

Barnes testified that he and three other Delta Force members were recruited for a secret mission arranged by Army Col. James 'Bo' Gritz to seek out possible camps of U.S. servicemen reportedly held in Laos.

He said the mission actually was aimed at discrediting accounts of remaining American POWs reported by Robert Garwood, a Marine private accused of collaborating with the Vietnamese during his own captivity.

Instead, he and the group crossed into Laos from Thailand in October 1981 and uncovered an 'armed camp' where 39 to 45 men who appeared to be Americans were being held.

But on his return to Thailand, Barnes said, the information was seized by Defense Intelligence Agency and U.S. embassy personnel and has been suppressed by the CIA.

Barnes said he was ordered not to divulge any information regarding the mission or he would be charged with violating the U.S. Neutrality Act.

Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, who visited Vietnam and Laos last week to talk to officials about reports of captive U.S. servicemen, asked Barnes why the government would cover up any evidence of American POWs.

'It could be embarrassing to the military,' Barnes said. 'They have said everyone has come back. It would be low for the morale of the military that some had been left behind.'

Gritz later led an independent mission into Laos in an effort to verify the report, Barnes said. Gritz was arrested by Laotian authorities and forced out of the country. The United States has denied any role in the Gritz mission.

Barnes said he had been warned by various individuals in the Army and intelligence agencies not to testify. He said an FBI agent had threatened to investigate him and Gritz on grounds of planning to assassinate President Reagan in an effort to discredit him.

Barnes, who said he is involved in private police work, said he had passed about seven polygraph tests supporting his information. He said the surviving men who accompanied him on the mission refused to testify and one is dead.

Murkowski planned to question Barnes later this week in private.